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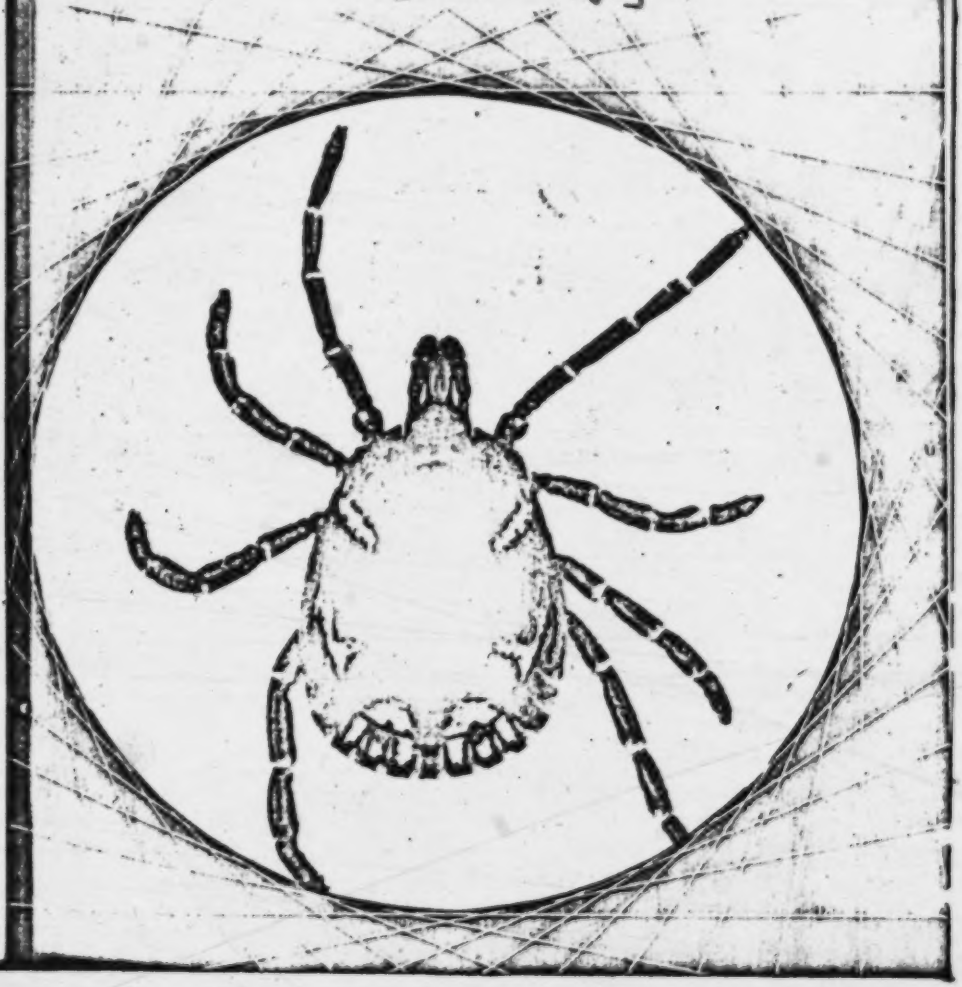

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The Peyote Cult of the Delaware Indians

by WILLIAM W. NEWCOMB, JR.

Texas Memorial Museum

276 Peyote *(Lophophora williamsii)* is a spineless, carrot-shaped, grayish-green cactus, which in this country grows primarily in the lower Rio Grande Valley. When eaten, either green, dried, or drunk as tea, peyote has the property of heightening or sharpening the perception of colors, forms, and sounds, or inducing visual and/or auditory hallucinations. The extent to which a person has or does not have hallucinations depends upon his physical and psychological state, the amount and type of peyote ingested, and perhaps other factors. Peyote is not a narcotic in that "It does not excite, stupefy, or produce muscular incoordination; there is no hangover; and the habitual user does not develop any increased tolerance or dependence" (La Barre, *et al.*, 1951: 582).

175 177 276 795 A knowledge of the properties of peyote and its utilization in religious ceremonies antedates recorded history in Mexico. It was not until late in the nineteenth century, however, that knowledge and a new ceremonial use of peyote developed and spread widely among the demoralized reservation Indians of the United States. The peyote cult was attractive to many of these Indians because it could easily replace outmoded or discarded religious rites, and because it was a continuing, if mild, rejection of elements of the dominant civilization. The new cult diffused to the Delaware Indians of northeastern Oklahoma about 1885, through the agency of John Wilson, a Caddo-Delaware from Anadarko in western Oklahoma (Petrullo, 1934: 83; La Barre, 1938: 109–123). This man had become a peyotist about 1880, and in subsequent years he converted many Delawares and other Indians in Oklahoma. John Wilson's version of peyotism, termed Big Moon or Moonhead, is today the most popular form of the cult among the main body of Delawares in northeastern Oklahoma. A less Christianized and less all-embracing religious cult called Little Moon was introduced somewhat later and has never attracted as many followers. I was unable to attend a Little Moon meeting; what follows pertains only to the Big Moon ceremony.

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My purposes in this article are to describe a fairly typical peyote meeting of the Delawares which I attended in the summer of 1952, and to discuss the changes which have occurred in this cult since 1930 when Petrullo made his study of Delaware peyotism (Petrullo, 1934).

THE BIG MOON PEYOTE CEREMONY

The Big Moon ceremonies of the Delawares are normally held in canvas covered tepees, generally in the cooler months of the year, but occasionally in hot weather. The reason for their seasonal nature is said to be in the interests of comfort; a tepee with a fire burning in it on a hot Oklahoma night is almost unbearable. Big Moon ceremonies are held on Saturday nights and last until Sunday noon. The peyote meeting I am about to describe was held on the farm of a Delaware, about ten miles east of the small town of Dewey, Washington County, Oklahoma. A tepee, about twenty feet in diameter, had been erected a few steps from the back door of the farm house. A bale of hay had been scattered about near the inside walls of the tepee; tarpaulins and quilts had then been spread over the hay, upon which the participants were to sit. In the center of the tepee was an oval depression, or fireplace, excavated to a depth of about six inches (Fig. 1). Extending from the fireplace were twelve lines or rays, made by scoring the hard ground to a depth of about half an inch. Within the fireplace, also scored in the earth, was a cross and at the intersection of its arms a heart-shaped figure. The fire, which was built over this heart, was made of twelve sticks interlaced in a V-shaped pattern with the open end towards the tepee entrance.

Just east of the fire, and lying along the long axis of the cross, was a stick of soft wood. One end was kept smoldering during the ceremony and was used to light corn husk-Bull Durham cigarettes. At the east end of the fireplace was a raised circular mound of hard packed earth. On the center of this mound, symbolic of the Sun, another heart had been scratched. On the opposite, or west side of the fireplace was the altar. This was an oblong, slightly raised, earthen area, on which was placed the ritual paraphernalia. In its center on a beaded cloth was a large, green peyote, or "Father Peyote." Just behind it a feathered and beaded peyote staff had been thrust into the ground. On the altar to the south of these objects was a glass bowl of green peyote, a kettle of peyote tea, and a leather bag of dried peyote buttons. To the north of "Father Peyote" on the altar was the drum used to accompany the singers (an old fashioned cast iron kettle, partly water-filled, and covered with a tightly drawn, wet, buckskin cover), and a bunch of sage.

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276 sage. The fireplace and the altar had been made many years pre-
795 viously, showing much use by being smooth and hard packed.
796 While the man who was to tend the fire and guard the door (fire-chief) and several helpers were arranging the tepee, several women were preparing peyote in the farmhouse kitchen. Peyote tea was made by chopping up dried peyote buttons and dropping them in boiling water. After steeping for a few minutes the tea was strained. Green peyote was prepared by peeling off the leathery skin, only the tops [372] being left intact. A little before ten o'clock the fire-chief lit the fire in the tepee with flint and steel. As soon as he came out of the tepee the leader (or road-chief) entered, followed by the drum-chief, the fourteen other participants, and finally the fire-chief. This meeting was somewhat atypical in the small number of participants; attendance usually averaged about twenty-five. After everyone was seated the drum-chief, a Sioux from the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota, [782] announced that several people had prayers and announcements to make. The road-chief, a Winnebago, then prayed in his own language. As translated next day, this prayer welcomed the participants and [755] asked for divine assistance in the conduct of the meeting. This meeting had been initiated by a Delaware woman who was ill (No. 14 in Fig. 1), and she stood up and thanked everyone for coming and assisting her in regaining her health. Another Delaware (No. 3 in Fig. 1) [609] then said a few words, principally to the effect that the "Native American Church" was not "idolatry" and that he was glad to welcome a white couple (the writer and his wife) to a meeting "to see what it really was like."

The road-chief then prayed again in Winnebago. When this prayer was concluded, he passed the peyote staff and a bunch of sage to the man on his left, who passed it on in a clockwise direction until it had

[text continues on p. 206]

276 (Explanation of Figure 1)

346 A. Altar
795 B. Fire. To some peyotists the heart repre-
996 sents the soul of the Fire Spirits.
C. Sun Mound. The heart symbolizes the soul of the Sun.
D. Ash Piles. Petrullo noted that in some versions of the rite these symbolize the lungs of Christ. I could not confirm this.
E. Water bucket and dipper.
F. Smoldering stick used to light cigarettes.
G. Tepee entrance.
H. Cross. Long axis symbolizes peyote road.
1. Road-chief, Winnebago
2. Delaware man
3. Delaware man
4. Shawnee man
5. Shawnee woman (4's wife)
6. Delaware man
7. Ego
8. Ego's wife
9. Sioux man
10. Sioux woman (9's wife)
11. Fire-chief, Delaware
12. Delaware man
13. Delaware man
14. Delaware sponsor
15. Winnebago woman (16's wife)
16. Winnebago man
17. Drum-chief, Sioux

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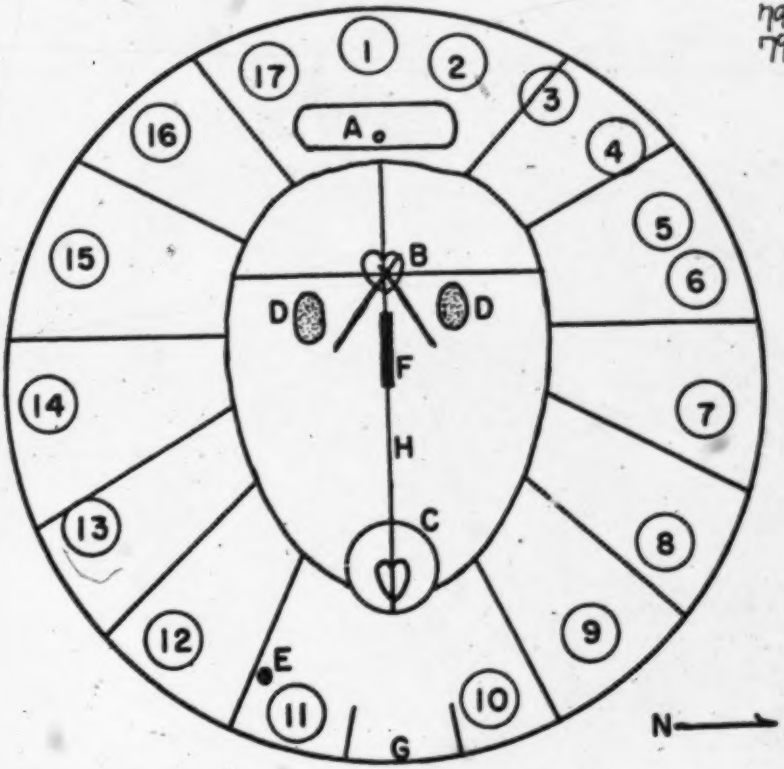
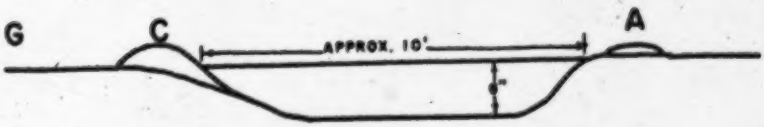
Figure 1



TOP VIEW



ELEVATION

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made a full circuit of the tepee. Many of the participants pressed the sage lightly to various parts of their bodies before passing it along. The road-chief then passed corn husks and Bull Durham tobacco in the same direction, everyone rolling a cigarette. These cigarettes were lit from the smoldering stick which was kept in readiness to the east of the fire. After the cigarettes had been smoked in silence, they were collected by the fire-chief. The butts were placed on the altar. Peyote was then passed in the same clockwise fashion; the road-chief directed that four buttons be taken, either two dried and two green, or four of a kind. Peyote tea was also passed, some individuals smearing their body, face, and hair with the tea, as well as drinking it.

When the peyote had completed the clockwise circuit, and as the participants were going through the ordeal of eating it, the road-chief prayed. He then began the opening song, holding a gourd rattle in his right hand and the peyote staff in his left, the drum-chief accompanying him on the drum. After four songs were sung the road-chief passed the staff and gourd rattle to the man on his left, accepted the drum from the drum-chief, and drummed for the man on his left, who sang four songs. After each set of four songs, the gourd rattle and staff were passed in a clockwise direction to the next man who sang a set of four songs, the previous singer becoming the drummer. The singing and drum accompaniment continued until midnight. Between sets of songs some individuals asked for peyote and others asked for water. The water was kept by the fire-chief's side in an ordinary bucket. Occasionally someone would leave the tepee, first getting permission from the road-chief. On re-entering, which was only permissible between sets of songs, the fire-chief cleansed and purified these people by brushing them from the head and shoulders down the arms to the fingers with an eagle feather fan. They then went around the north side of the fire to the altar, where they touched "Father Peyote," and the road-chief brushed them in a similar manner with another eagle feather fan. Then they returned to their places.

About midnight the fire-chief raked the ashes from the fire for the first time. He did this by moving the burning sticks eastward, taking a special peeled stick about six feet long and smoothing out the embers. After they were smoothed, another stick, somewhat longer than the first, was used to divide the ashes along the long axis of the cross, the ashes being formed into two neat piles on either side of the fire. After this was accomplished the fire was returned to its original position, built up, and the whole depression was swept from west to east

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with an ordinary kitchen broom. After midnight the ashes were removed from the fire whenever a considerable quantity had accumulated.

The road-chief prayed, peyote was passed, and the songs began again. The throb of the drum and the songs were interrupted only occasionally; someone would ask for peyote, a person would mumble, and once one of the Winnebagos (No. 16, Fig. 1) asked the road-chief for permission to attempt a cure of his wife's swollen feet. This request was granted. The Winnebago walked around the fireplace and altar in a clockwise direction and cedar needles were thrown on the fire. He "caught" the smoke in a feather and dipped it into a cup of water which he had in readiness. He then brushed the feather over the woman's legs, concentrating on her feet. He drew a faintly glowing ember from the fire, took the ash into his mouth, and spit the ash into the ash pile nearest him. He then vigorously sucked the patient's feet.

Also early in the morning the Delaware sponsor asked the road-chief if she could pray for herself and her family. He assented. Standing next to the altar, she smoked a corn husk cigarette and, with tears streaming down her cheeks, related first in English and then in Delaware the story of her illness, her unhappiness, and her desire for the good health of her family. A little later a woman (No. 10 in Fig. 1) asked if she might be allowed to sing. Permission being given, she sang the customary four songs, her husband drumming for her.

At dawn the road-chief announced that the drum was going around for the last time. Following this last round the sponsor, her husband and young daughter (who had awakened and come into the tepee) stood up. The road-chief cast cedar needles upon the fire and brushed the entire bodies of the family with his eagle feather fan in the customary way. He then prayed. After they had resumed their seats the road-chief prayed again, following which candy and crackers were passed. The meeting was closed by the assemblage reciting the Lord's Prayer. The fire-chief rose and went around the tepee in the clockwise direction shaking everyone's hand and congratulating them on a successful meeting. The person on his left followed him in a like manner, and so on until everybody had shaken hands with everyone else and the tepee was emptied. Coffee was made and the participants relaxed in the yard and talked until the noon meal, after which the group dispersed.

It is difficult, perhaps impossible, to convey the attitude of peyotists and the atmosphere of a peyote meeting by means of a description of what happens during the course of the night. Perhaps the general

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attitude is best summed up as one of intense emotion and reverence. It could hardly be otherwise, since any individual may come face to face with supernatural powers during the course of the ceremony. Even if he does not, he has come to the ceremony in the sincere belief that he can and will get help in solving the most serious of life's problems. This precludes a profane attitude. I can only echo Petrullo (1934: 88) who said that the atmosphere of the ceremony was ". . . accompanied by the deepest feeling of reverence and awe and peace that it has been my lot to have witnessed either among primitive people or Christian groups engaged in worshipping their God."

Peyote is of course the focal point of the peyote meeting, but peyote itself is not worshipped. Informants stress this again and again, probably because they have so frequently been attacked by Whites and Christian Indians on this point. Peyote is both a symbol of the supernatural forces being worshipped and a sacrament. For the Delaware peyotist it is a means of establishing contact with the supernatural world and of securing a personally satisfactory working relationship with the spirit forces. While Peyote is the most important supernatural force present, it is not the only one. The spiritual forces of Sun, Moon, Fire, and others are there. Their importance and even their existence depends upon individual interpretation (Fig. 1).

The outward emphasis of Delaware peyote meetings is upon curing. The stated purpose of the meeting I have described was to assist in the cure of the sponsor, and there was a shamanistic curing rite performed during the course of the evening. It should also be pointed out that many peyotists are eager to relate how peyote has cured them of various diseases. It would be a mistake, however, to regard Big Moon peyotism as merely a curing rite, or even to think of it as primarily so. Peyote is regarded as a spirit force through which men can approach the omnipotent supernatural power or powers. Informants sometimes equate peyote with Jesus and say that White men use the "Jesus road to God" while the "Indian takes the Peyote Road."

BIG MOON PEYOTISM—THEN AND NOW

Unfortunately Petrullo did not attend a Big Moon meeting with the Delawares near Dewey, but did participate in a Big Moon meeting of the Delawares at Anadarko. Normally there are many minor divergencies between meetings and tepee arrangements because there is no priesthood or dogmatic creed. As Petrullo (1934: 31) said, "A religion that insists that each individual can learn its doctrines only through personal experience with its gods must necessarily exist in a variable

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form." Despite the differences in locale and in the inherent variability of the cult, there is a surprising correspondence between the Big Moon meeting of 1930 in Anadarko and the one held in 1952 near Dewey. The similarity between the arrangement of the tepee I have described and the eight variants of the Big Moon altar and tepee which Petrullo diagrams is striking; the same is true of the conduct of the meetings. The principal differences between the meetings are presented in Table I (Petrullo, 1934: 87–95). The differences are minor; for the most part they are well within the range of variation of the cult, and of course in most respects the meetings are similar or identical. The principal change seems to be that women are allowed a much greater part in the

TABLE I

Differences in Big Moon Peyotism
1930 and 1952

1930—Anadarko	1952—Dewey
1. Quiet period in afternoon prior to ceremony.	1. Participants gather just before ceremony.
2. Road-chief seated people; women on south.	2. Sit where you like. Women seated on north and south.
3. Oil lamp near altar.	3. No light other than fire.
4. Personal paraphernalia permitted after midnight.	4. No personal paraphernalia in evidence at any time.
5. Crucifix on altar.	5. No crucifix.
6. Only road-chief smoked Indian tobacco cigarette to open meeting.	6. Everybody smokes corn husk-Bull Durham cigarette.
7. Women given only the peyote tea.	7. Women eat green or dried peyote; men drink tea.
8. "Fanning" with eagle-feather fan after sets of songs.	8. Absent.
9. Drum-chief sang after road-chiefs' opening song.	9. Drum-chief is last to sing; clockwise circuit followed without exception.
10. Women did not sing.	10. Woman sang, but permission had to be given by road-chief.
11. No midnight intermission.	11. Midnight intermission.
12. No shamanistic curing (possibly permitted).	12. Winnebago performed cure on wife.
13. At dawn road-chief sang "morning water-song"; each person drank water.	13. Negative.
14. Filed outside, washed faces, faced rising sun, returned to tepee, etc.	14. Meeting closed with Lord's Prayer.
15. No breakfast.	15. Breakfast.
16. Candy, etc., distributed at noon meal.	16. Candy passed before leaving tepee.

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meeting than they were two decades ago. In this respect peyotists seem to be merely following the general trend of White society.

Big Moon peyotism diffused to the Delawares as a substitute for an outmoded religious system, but its replacement of the traditional religion has been slow and incomplete. The peyote cult is still regarded by many Delawares as a somewhat inferior replacement for the traditional ceremonies. What is more, during World War II the Big House Ceremony, the major, annual religious rite of the Delawares, was revived and held three times, albeit in abbreviated form. The Delawares would continue the old rites today, but because of expense, cultural decay, and other factors, they have been finally abandoned. It is doubtful whether the traditional rites, even if abbreviated and vestigial, can ever again be held. Petrullo (1934: 175) underestimated their strength when he said more than two decades ago that they were "No longer able to perform the ancient ceremonies. . . ." Neither Petrullo nor I found out what proportion of the Delawares were peyotists, Christians, or adherents to the old religion, so that changes in religious affiliation are largely a matter of conjecture. It is known, however, that many of the proponents of the abandoned religion have become peyotists, but at least a few have become Christians. In short, the peyote cult has never completely replaced the traditional religion, nor has it gained universal approval. The most that can be said by way of comparison is that the Big Moon cult was a covert, lively, and popular one in the thirties; it remains so today.

Probably the greatest changes which have occurred in Delaware Big Moon peyotism within the past twenty-five years have been in the reasons why people are drawn to it. There is not space here to discuss this topic in detail, but it should be pointed out that the peyote cult originally diffused to the Delawares, and was still attractive to them in the early thirties because:

> . . it teaches acceptance of the new world, and makes possible an attitude of resignation in the face of the probable disappearance of the Indian groups as distinct peoples, culturally and racially, by insisting on the necessity of emancipation from mundane aspirations. . . . [The peyote cult] is the natural but final recourse of a subjugated people who fully realize the inadequacy of their material means to restore their former world-state (Petrullo, 1934: 1).

The appeal of modern peyotism is, at least in part, of a different nature. Briefly, the Delawares are no longer a cohesive cultural or social entity; they are geographically scattered and socially atomized. There is no tribal activity which draws them together as Delawares, and every year there are fewer distinctive customs which set them apart from

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other people. Yet the individual Delaware is not an ordinary American; he is thought of by the public as an Indian, and he thinks of himself as an Indian. One way in which he can express this Indianness and feel that he is a part of a larger group is to be a peyotist. The peyote cult gives him an opportunity to participate in ceremonies with others who occupy a similar position in American life, and it provides him with an opportunity to express his Indian cultural heritage, however slight it may be. In the meeting just described there were Winnebagos, Sioux, and Shawnees, in addition to the Delawares. This is normal for a Delaware peyote meeting; in fact, their meetings always include members of other tribes. They also frequently attend meetings with the Osage, Quapaw, and others. In short, in earlier times the Delaware Big Moon peyote cult was a religious expression of assimilation and an attempt to preserve something from the shattered cultural past. Today it functions more as a religious symbol of the Indian minority and a rallying point for what has been termed a Pan-Indian society (Newcomb, 1955).

SUMMARY

The arrangement of the tepee and the conduct of Delaware Big Moon peyote meetings has remained essentially constant since 1930. Over this span of time the Big Moon cult has not succeeded in completely replacing the traditional religion, nor has it apparently become any more popular. Probably the greatest changes have occurred in the reasons for the cults' appeal to the Delawares. The modern attractions of the peyote cult are particularly strong in its aspects as an *Indian* ceremony and as a rallying point for Pan-Indianism, rather than in the solace it offers to "a subjugated people."

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